

Germans Rediscover Nuclear Power

by Rainer Apel

With the defeat of the “red-green” coalition (Social Democrats and Greens) in the Sept. 18, 2005 elections in Germany, there was hope among many that this also meant the end to an entire era of radical ecologism, which among other things had led to a foul government-industry deal in 2000, to phase out nuclear power by 2020. Many hoped that the Social Democrats, after the divorce from the Greens and their new Grand Coalition marriage with the Christian Democrats, would now begin to argue for a return to nuclear power.

One indication of this hope was a newspaper ad which appeared in numerous news dailies at the end of October, by the two labor unions Ver.di (services) and IGBCE (mining, energy), and the four leading power-producing firms E.ON, EnBW, RWE, and Vattenfall, which cautiously that to secure power supplies for the future, “no source of energy should be excluded,” and stated that existing nuclear power plants should receive permits to run as long as safety standards are met, implying they could run for 40, 50, even 60 years, instead of the 30 years set as a limit by the red-green decree. The ad did not call for any new nuclear power plant to be built, but it was a remarkable step, because for the first time in years, labor unions said something positive on nuclear technology.

However, these hopes for a return of the atom were betrayed, as the Grand Coalition signed a rotten compromise agenda, which kept the red-green anti-nuclear power decree intact. The only positive aspect in the new government’s energy policy was a commitment to continue, and eventually upgrade, funding of nuclear research.

Power Outages

The broad public outcry over the power blackouts which kept 250,000 citizens of the Münsterland region in western Germany without any electricity for days, at the end of November, and announcements by Germany’s power suppliers of price increases for electricity and household gas, during the first two weeks of December, provided new arguments for the pro-nuclear lobby. Breaking profile, on Dec. 22 two state governors, Christian Wulff (Lower Saxony) and Günther Öttinger (Baden-Württemberg), in interviews pointed to the rising expenses for energy and the need to secure energy supply for industry and consumers. “We will not be able to keep the timetable for the turning-off of modern nuclear power plants. . . . Because of rising energy prices, a mix of energy sources is required,” Wulff said, leaving it open whether he was only

proposing that existing power plants operate several years longer, or proposing building new plants.

Öttinger said: "I think that the development of electricity prices over the coming months, and new nuclear power plant projects on the European energy market, will make the Social Democrats rethink their views." Also labor union officials have begun to question the (red-green) dumping of nuclear power, Öttinger said, referencing the aforementioned labor union newspaper ad. Öttinger warned that if the agreement to reject nuclear power, part of the Grand Coalition agreement, remains unaltered, the power plant at Neckarwestheim in his own state would have to be shut down in three years, and then Baden-Württemberg would be forced to import electricity, or face the emigration of companies and jobs to other European countries which do have secured power supplies.

The sudden escalation of the (now resolved) gas dispute between Russia and Ukraine delivered more arguments in favor of nuclear power. On Jan. 2, the day after Russia's Gazprom firm had shut down all gas supplies to Ukraine, German Economics Minister Michael Glos said in a radio interview that although the Grand Coalition government had resolved not to change the anti-nuclear policy, it was evident that for the medium-term perspective of securing energy supplies, nuclear technology again had to be put on the agenda.

Non-Nuclear Power Sources Not Enough

On Jan. 3, Anette Schavan, German Minister of Research and Technology, said in a newspaper interview that renewable energy sources (wind, solar, geothermal) could never replace an "energy mix including nuclear." Peter Ramsauer, vice chairman of the Christian Democrats' group in the national parliament, criticized the Grand Coalition agreement on nuclear power, saying it did not have an eternal value, but was challenged by the reality of uncertain fossil energy supplies, as evidenced in the Russian-Ukrainian gas conflict. Edmund Stoiber, Governor of Bavaria, on the same day, said that it was "time to discuss the nuclear issue not on the basis of ideologies, but rather on the basis of what is technically feasible and safe, to secure the energy supply of the future."

So far, there have been only angry responses from the Social Democrats to these initiatives, and none of the aforementioned political prominents has yet mentioned the option of building new nuclear power plants. But it is clear that the debate on nuclear technology is prominently back on the agenda, after more than 20 years. The LaRouche movement, the only political force in Germany that has unconditionally endorsed nuclear power and has, for years, called for new power plants, will escalate its campaign now, to convince the German population that returning to nuclear fission, and moving on to thermonuclear fusion, are the best options for securing the energy supply. In addition, natural gas and crude oil are raw materials much too precious (for the production of fertilizers, for example), to be burned up and released into the air through chimneys.